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Press release

Embargoed until 18.00 hours, Tuesday 19 February 2008

Council achievements recognised but further improvement essential

The Accounts Commission recognises the improvement achieved by local government in Scotland. Its report *Overview of the local authority audits 2007*, published today, highlights progress in services and the need for an increased focus on key areas to meet the challenges ahead.

Professor John Baillie Chair of the Accounts Commission, said:

“Local government in Scotland continues to improve. Councils are facing and addressing significant challenges. We particularly welcome increased recycling, higher council tax collection rates and the general picture of sound financial reporting.

“But the drive for continuous improvement in services continues and there are ongoing pressures on resources.

“We have identified a number of key areas where there is a need for increased focus. For example, councils need to improve performance management significantly to enable them to show whether they are improving services for local people. This will support the shift towards an outcomes based approach, as set out in the Concordat between the Scottish Government and COSLA.”

The Commission says that councils should focus on the following key areas:

- supporting and developing leadership skills and capacity
- demonstrating the benefits of community planning, working with other public bodies such as the NHS and shared services
- taking a more strategic approach to resources
- stronger commitment to testing the competitiveness of their services
- developing robust baseline data against which improvements in service delivery can be measured and demonstrated
- improving performance management to demonstrate delivery of the outcomes based approach.

The report will be the subject of a talk by Professor John Baillie to the David Hume Institute, to be held this evening at 18.00 at the Royal Society, 22–26 George Street, Edinburgh.

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Notes to Editors:

1. The full report, including the findings, will be available on Audit Scotland's website from 18.00 hours, 19 February at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
2. Copies of the transcript for Professor John Baillie's talk will also be available on Audit Scotland's website at 18.00 on 19 February. Attendance at the talk is by arrangement with the David Hume Institute. <http://www.davidhumeinstitute.com>.
3. More information about the outcomes based approach is available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/923/0054147.pdf>
3. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and is independent of both central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend £16 billion of public money properly and effectively. For more information go to: <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/accounts/index.htm>

Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission. (The Audit Commission operates only in England.)

4. Best Value and Community planning are the duties placed on local authorities by the Local Government Act 2003 to demonstrate their on-going commitment to providing better services to local people.

The Audit of Best Value is undertaken by Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission. It responds to the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, which gave councils a new power to promote or improve the well-being of their area and the people living within it and new responsibilities including:

- making arrangements which secure Best Value, defined as 'continuous improvement in the performance of the authority's functions, having regard to efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equal opportunities.
- discharging their duties in a way which contributes to sustainable development
- maintaining a community planning process
- making arrangements for reporting to the public on their performance
- meeting new rules relating to trading.

Key Features of the Audit are:

- The focus is on each council's performance over time rather than comparisons between councils. It takes account of differences in local priorities, constraints and opportunities. Therefore league tables and scores are inappropriate.
- All 32 councils in Scotland are audited, on a rolling programme basis
- Each audit results in a report to the Accounts Commission for Scotland
- A report is published after each individual audit.